

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
March 22, 2020

The Fourth Sunday of Lent: The Healing Salve of Christ

I must admit that when I hear this reading from John's Gospel -- a fascinating story, isn't it? -- the first thing I want to do is grab the religious leaders by the shoulders and shake them while saying, "Don't you realize what he said? This guy was blind! This guy was born blind and now he can see!" And then a bit later in the story the man's parents get involved and when I hear how they respond to the news, I want to grab them by the shoulders and give them a good shake, "You got to be kidding me! Your son has never seen before. He's never seen springtime or looked into your eyes before. What's the matter with you guys?"

The Gospel seems to have two narratives for sale. I wonder which one you're buying. It's a fascinating story. The first narrative is that of the Pharisees and the man's parents. When they find out that a blind man -- for the religious leaders, he is one of their flock and for the parents, well, he is their son -- when they find out that he has been healed, their first question is, "What is this going to cost me?" I think that anytime we lose our chains, there are those standing there with a new set of fetters wanting to make sure freedom doesn't get too comfortable for us.

There is another story about when Jesus drove a bunch of demons out of this guy and for some reason the demons went into a herd of pigs that were nearby. The pigs ran off a cliff into the sea and the herders went and told the folks in the town so all the people came out to see, and what did they find? They found this man (who had been possessed, living in caves, tormented for years) and, well, he was sitting there with Jesus and in his right mind. And the text says the people were afraid and they asked Jesus to leave (Mark 5:1-20). "It's all fine that this man ain't crazy anymore but what about our pigs, Jesus? You can take your bolt cutters elsewhere. Time for you to move on."

It's like our story today. It seems this man really was the blind man we used to pass in the street. He says he is the man. His parents say he is the man. He was blind; now he sees. But come on, Jesus, it's the Sabbath day. There are six days for you to work. Perform your tricks on those days. Today is the Sabbath Day. We got rules around here, Jesus. You must think you're something special.

So anyway, that's the first story for sale. What's all this grace in your life going to cost me? That's what we ask sometimes.

The second narrative is, well, let me put it to you this way: I've had Nurse Florence Nightingale on my mind a lot lately. I guess we should call her St. Florence. She is a saint in the Episcopal Church. Her feast day is August 12th but she has been on my mind lately because I reckon the work of her lifetime and maybe her prayers for us now are both helping. She probably understands what we are going through. I've also had Constance and her Companions on my mind lately. You might not know them. The city of Memphis, TN in the 19th century had periodic bouts of Yellow Fever. The worst came in 1878. The Fever traveled up the Mississippi that August. Word got around quickly that Yellow Fever had arrived and

within two weeks 22,000 people -- anyone who could -- fled the city. But the nuns of the Episcopal Sisterhood of St. Mary, along with a few priests, did not flee. They did not run. They stayed behind to care for the sick. Over 5000 people would die before winter came. Ultimately, their decision to stay behind proved to be a deeply faithful one and, yes, it cost them their lives, too.

So I've had Florence Nightingale and Constance and the Martyrs of Memphis on my mind lately as we travel through the unknown lands of this Coronavirus Pandemic. Because the other narrative that we are offered this morning is about healing. There are those who, like Florence and Constance, dedicate their lives to healing. There will always be some who want to profit from a crisis, be it financial or otherwise. I read about a man in Chattanooga who drove to several states, over a thousand miles, buying up all the hand sanitizer so he could take advantage of the demand as this virus moved in. There will be those who want to debate the rules, the politics, the talking points -- all of that. Then there is Jesus who time and again has shown us that he knows what it will cost him but he is more concerned about the work of the Kingdom of God. He is not interested in enabling our fears. He's interested in liberation. He is interested in healing the man who was born blind. He is interested in making us whole.

I think Nurse Florence and Constance and her Companions are on my mind because there are so many at this moment, while a scary virus spreads quietly through our towns and cities, who are engaging in this very faithful Christ-like work of doing everything in their power to heal those who are sick. There are hospitals converting parking garages to clinics and making homemade face masks for their workers. There are nurses quarantining themselves from their families so they can keep on serving. There are doctors going back for more every shift. (I heard that in Spain they go onto their balconies each evening to applaud these healthcare workers.) And it's not just them. It's people delivering food to neighbors and phone calls to elderly friends and offering to help with childcare while school's out. That is the second narrative of today's Gospel. Christ is more interested in being with those who are suffering and in revealing God's will for their lives. This is our work, too. This is our story. We all get to share the healing salve of Christ. *Amen.*